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# Solace of Dinosaur Ridge

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Dinosaur Ridge has become an essential and necessary place for me since our move to Denver from a small university town on the wild and open prairies of Wyoming. Where would I have the freedom to roam and think in the urban sprawl of Denver? Where could I botanize and hunt for fossils? How would I stand the heat and smog of an August afternoon? Where could I quickly get away from people and sirens and honking automobile horns? Piled on top of these concerns were the pressures of my deanship in an inner-city college with uniquely gifted yet disadvantaged students and a pressured and strained faculty.

Within weeks of our arrival from Laramie, I discovered the small town of Morrison nestled behind an uplifted hogback formation called the Dakota Ridge or more fondly Dinosaur Ridge. This piece of wild land lay twenty-five minutes from central Denver, twenty-five minutes by car to magic. I took my first stroll along the trail following the ridge top after a heavy September frost. I breathed the ridge's fresh and bracing air high above the smog of the city. That first walk along the ridge I repeated over and over again from September to April for seven years straight. Sometimes I would go solo and sometimes with my wife and family, but most often with my little dog Mini, a golden English cocker spaniel with drooping ears and alert brown eyes.

This weekly ramble had become as much a ritual for me as my weekly walks on the Laramie Plains. Summer time changed the Wyoming ritual slightly with hikes in the alluring Snowy Range and now in the Front Range in Colorado. The high prairies of southern Wyoming have something very much in common with Dinosaur Ridge, namely the Laramide Orogeny. Sixty to Seventy-five million years ago something within the Earth's core forced prehistoric swamplands (washed by an inland sea) upward, not fast in human terms, but if four billion years could be transposed into one human life, the Laramide Orogeny raised the Rockies from sea level to almost three miles above sea level during the equivalent time of two weeks.

The high bald prairie of southern Wyoming rests at 7,200, some thousand feet higher than the crests of Dinosaur Ridge. Inner forces of our planet are still pushing this land upward perhaps a an eighth inch a century, not quite as fast as the growth rate of the Himalayas half way around the globe. But the Laramie Plains are essentially as flat as a sea bed while Dinosaur Ridge is a high skinny ridge with downsloping Morrison Formation of grey beach rock on its east side and bright red Dakota Formation sandstone on its west side. The extreme north side is transected by Interstate 70. Why the name Dinosaur Ridge? Dinosaurs galore! Buried within the Dakota sandstones are the bones of stegosaurs, brontosaurs, and igaunadons discovered by Arthur Lakes in 1877. Eventually ten quarries yielded many fossils for rival museums in Philadelphia,

and New Haven. Today Dinosaur Ridge is designated as a national natural landmark with guided and self-guided tours.

I love to visit one spot on the west side of Dinosaur Ridge which exposes the imprint of a brontosaurus made millions of years ago on an ancient muddy shoreline. The beast's immense weight sunk him deep into the mud. His tracks probably filled in with algal ooze helping preserve the footprints in hardened mud-rock. Lower down the ridge are fossilized rib and skull bones of camarasaurs carried by streams and deposited in deeper mud hardened to sandstone and exposed by erosion to present-day viewers.

On the east side of Dinosaur Ridge lies a strangely rippled rock (formerly beach) hardened to gray sandstone and tilted at a ludicrous angle of forty-five degrees. Within this beach rock are giant three-toed tracks of a vegetarian dinosaur known as the iguanadon. Along side of his prints are three-toed prehistoric bird prints of an ostrich-like dinosaur. Early morning shadows fill the tracks, clearly revealing their deep imprint. Because the beach is no longer sand but rock and because the beach lies at an extreme angle, it is difficult to imagine a sea level beach with heavy, humid air and swampy vegetation.

On one occasion I had taken a quick walk along the east side of Dinosaur Ridge at sunset before boarding a jet the next morning bound for Charleston, South Carolina. Within hours of my arrival, I walked the Edisto Swamp trail not far from the Georgia line with my nephew, niece and their families. The geographic juxtaposition hit home. Here in the Edisto Swamp I breathed heavy vaporous air while hours earlier I breathed the bracing air of the high desert. At Edisto I marvelled at the delicate perfection of form and color of swamp orchids, and the lush array of ferns, vine-covered southern pines, and profusion of palmettos. On Dinosaur Ridge hours earlier wind blew through the needles of pinyons and junipers. Deep in Edisto I smelled mud and phosphates and thick vegetation. Up on Dinosaur I smelled dust and rock and the scent of sage. Edisto provides a secure home for dinosaur-like alligators and other reptiles like the cottonmouth water moccasin. Edisto became for me prehistoric, precambrian Colorado whose oozing muds would eventually harden and be uplifted to a multi-layered Dinosaur Ridge.

Interstate 70 cuts through Dinosaur Ridge and exposes all the layers of hardened pre-Laramide Orogeny sand and mud. As dinosaur-like trucks and RV's revved their engines up I-70, Mini and I walked through a hundred million years of time. We stared up at the cut-through formations ranging in color from gray to black to red to brown and yellow. Even though the heavy traffic of I-70 roared like a troop of dinosaurs, we managed to journey backwards through time.

I let myself dream of what things looked like 300 million years ago during the early Pennsylvanian Period with its carboniferous jungles. I imagined looking westward to see an ancient mountain range 240 million years older than the present-day Rockies. This mountain range, like any other, had streams gushing

off its slopes depositing reddish quartz sand, silt grains and clay. I tried to imagine these reddish deposits hardening into the red sandstone of the Fountain Formation and the Red Rocks Amphitheatre of Beatles fame. But the only beetles I envisioned were black creeping things on the muddy ooze of shorelines. What must it have been like 140 million years ago during the Jurassic Period? I imagined not seeing I-70 anymore, and hearing the howl of meat-eating dinosaurs thumping through swamps and wetlands in an insufferably dank and humid atmosphere. What happened to Colorado? The only hint of its future existence lay in the gray and green and maroon claystone which would become the Morrison Formation.

I imagined escaping from wretched beasts to arrive at the late Cretaceous Period about 75 million years ago. Those frightening beasts hadn't yet left the scene but now a great inland sea lapped the shore with tidal ripples in the mud covered by seaweed. The air remained heavy with no mountain breezes, just a flat swamp with bright green-eyed iguanadons pitter-patting along the mud in search of lush fern-like cycads. Gigantic feathered beasts flapped their awkward wings above my head and cackled like mythological harpies. The tan, dark gray, and black shales oozed with mud and slime. I see that Mini has stepped into a mud puddle and once again hear the roar of I-70.

What I like most about Dinosaur Ridge is the relative peace and calm on top of its rocky spine. Up there grow yuccas, cacti, Gambel oak, pinyon pine, Utah juniper, sagebrush, mountain mahogany, kinnikinnik, golden banner, harebells, and scores of other wildflowers. Sailing overhead are ravens, hawks, golden eagles, swallows, and nearby, buzzing hummingbirds. Mini simply loves it up there on the ridge between September and April when there are no snakes to worry about, especially a ground-level cocker spaniel. She loves to peer over the edge of cliffs and stare into space. All I have to say is "go see!" and she runs to the edge and takes it all in. She stops and listens to chickadees going chick a dee dee dee. She eyeballs each pine squirrel scampering up a twisted tree trunk. Even when she squats to urinate, she's all eyes for what's going on around her. Yes, she's a worthy successor to the dinosaurs of old.

At a certain narrow point on the trail's crest, I often stop and feel the texture of a rippled rock, rippled and uplifted from that inland sea of millions of years ago. Algal materials covered earlier ripples to preserve their form when beaches became buried under layers of other deposits hardened to rock. Tidal ripples are amazing to behold millions of years later, more amazing, in a sense, than the sarcophagus of the Emperor Charlemagne, or the Rosetta Stone. Why? Sixty million years! Imagine finding a sixty-million year old plant in your backyard. How can one fathom the meaning of a wilderness of time found in sixty million years? A sand ripple is as common on the receded sea delta of the Colorado River down in Mexico and as it was on the Great Inland Sea of ancient interior Colorado. But sixty million years separates the two ripples. Ripples we can understand, but time between may be impossible. Or is it? We do have that

special gift of Kantian intuition and Thoreauvian imagination. Dreams can cut through time like lightning through clouds to illuminate an otherwise darkened land. A stegosaur's roar and thumping step can still be heard in the spirit's core. The numbers sixty, sixty million, sixty trillion do not defy the human spirit. We can even imagine various species of dinosaurs having green flesh with orange spots.

I remember driving up I-70 one extremely windy day to an early January conference site on Lookout Mountain above Denver. Flames raced up Dinosaur Ridge's northeast slope. Pinyon trees blazed with sparks hopping upridge in a spectacle of beauty and terror. The blackened vegetation below the flames stood phantom-like in marked contrast to the whiteness of snow. Within days Mini and I walked along that ridge top to see the damage. Mini sniffed the air and ground full time once we arrived at darkened soil and blackened pine branches. Even snow had become dark with black and gray ashes making for fertile soil next spring. Not too much damage here.

One mild February weekend we had a surprise visit from my son. My wife, Maura, and I packed a lunch for the three and a half of us (Mini included) to take advantage of the warm pre-spring sunshine up on Dinosaur Ridge. Buds laced the branches of bare scrub oaks and the most delicate and tiny flowers of sandworts graced the ground at our feet like miniature dots of snow. Arriving at a high sandstone upthrust, we stopped for lunch. The foothills of the Rockies spread westward and upward obscuring the high Front Range. We could clearly see that our ridge protruded skyward as an uneroded shell fragment of an outer layer of sandstone and shales which once covered the Rocky Mountains. We finished our lunch atop the layers of time by recollecting our own family layers of time when Rich was a boy in Laramie with his two sisters Michelle and Maureen. We all had a good reunion up there on the ridge. Rich now lived in Seattle and his sisters in New York and Fort Lauderdale as spread apart as sediment from the Rockies down prairie streams to the sea.

One crisp autumn day I hiked solo over the ridge when rustling oak leaves had changed to bright scarlet. They rustled like prayer flags in the Himalayas. High in the foothills across the way tongues of aspen blazed with a golden fire. Gray clouds swooped upslope like volcanic clouds millions of years ago when tectonic plates collided within the Laramide Orogeny. During our civilized state, we humans have experienced very little volcanism. Vesuvius, Etna, Krakatoa, Mount St. Helens are tiny firecrackers compared to the eruptions of the Yellowstone Caldera 600,000 years ago when our primitive continent lay blackened for months on end. How frightening it must have been to see ranges of volcanoes puffing and exploding red hot lava.

Snow sprinkled down from the upslope clouds and gathered in windy wisps along my trail. A yellowjacket bee buzzed for cover among the last of the autumnal flowers still barely in bloom. It snowed yet harder in chilling winds and the sky darkened. It felt good to be up there; I could have easily been hundreds of miles

away. It grew even colder and some leaves blew off the scrub trees. My hands and feet grew numb, and it was time to make my descent to cares of the city below. Chickadees along the trail chirped to bid me farewell.

Yes, I'm glad I discovered a place called Dinosaur Ridge. Up there, my urban-encased being is truly energized and revitalized. It is a place of magic. It is a place which allows the spirit to roam free through time and space.

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